A FREE CREATURE KEEPER · LONG ISLAND DUNGEON MASTER

Blisterback

A free CR 2 monster of the Athasian salt flats. It feels you walk on the crust and cannot find you anywhere else.

CR 2 · levels 2 to 4 · one stat block and a d12 · fifth edition (SRD 5.1)

On Athas the salt flats lie in a white crust a hand thick over dry mud. A caravan crosses one in a night. The blisterback lives at the edge of the crust, in a hollow it has scoured to bare mud with its own acid, and it hunts the people who cross.

A blisterback is a Medium monstrosity, low and slate-grey, a man's length from snout to tail, with a back of swollen blisters rimed in salt and a gland behind the shoulder that holds acid. It is blind past arm's reach. The crust carries the step of any creature standing on it, and the blisterback feels every step within sixty feet. It feels nothing that stands on rock, sand or wet ground.

In 30+ years of running games, the crossings my tables remember are the ones where the map told them what would happen and they went anyway.

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The flat

The Tarrow Pan is forty miles across, white and level, with rock along the east edge and dunes along the west. Crust is white. Rock, sand, dry mud and brine are not, and the line between them can be seen from a hundred yards by any character who looks. No check is called for. The referee draws that line on the table before anyone steps onto the white.

The way round the pan along the rock takes three days. The way across takes one night.

How it hunts

The blisterback lies in its hollow within a mile of the rock and waits for the crust to speak. It does not stalk. A party on the white is felt a minute before it is in range, and the blisterback comes at the nearest creature on the crust, a pack beast before a rider and a rider before a man on foot, because the weight is felt and the size of the step with it.

It opens with the spray on the thickest cluster of creatures within ten feet, then bites whoever ran. It circles on the crust to line up the next spray. It does not follow a creature onto bare ground, because it does not know where that creature is.

It withdraws at 22 hit points or fewer, or whenever it feels no creature on the crust at the start of its turn. It goes back along its own line, and the line is etched into the white where its acid ran.

How to run it

1. Put the white on the table first. Where the crust ends, where the rock begins, and how far the nearest rock is from the party's line. A character who looks sees all of it.

2. Give the first hour to the etching. A fine line cut into the crust, then a second beside it. The table below has twelve things to find. Nothing attacks.

3. Open with the spray. The blisterback comes from the side with the longest line of sight, which on a flat is any side. It sprays the thickest cluster, and the DC 13 Dexterity save is the first roll of the fight.

4. Name the nearest bare ground. After the first spray the characters have a way out, and it is as many feet away as the referee drew it. A character off the crust is not felt and is not seen.

5. Let it go. When it withdraws the pan goes quiet, and the line its acid cut on the way out leads back to the hollow.

The stat block

Blisterback

Medium monstrosity, unaligned. A salt-flat hunter with an acid gland behind the shoulder. Challenge 2 (450 XP).

AC 13 (natural armor)	HP 45 (6d8+18)	Speed 30 ft.
STR 15 (+2) DEX 12 (+1) CON 16 (+3)	INT 2 (-4) WIS 12 (+1) CHA 5 (-3)	Blindsight 5 ft., tremorsense 60 ft. (see Crust Sense), passive Perception 11. The blisterback is blind beyond these ranges.

DAMAGE RESISTANCES

Acid.

DRAWN TO

Anything that walks on the salt crust.

CRUST SENSE

The blisterback has tremorsense out to 60 feet against creatures standing on salt crust. It has none against any other ground.

BITE

Melee Weapon Attack: +4 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. Hit: 9 (2d6+2) piercing damage.

ACID SPRAY (RECHARGE 5-6)

The blisterback spits acid in a 10-foot cone. Each creature in the cone makes a DC 13 Dexterity saving throw, taking 14 (4d6) acid damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one.

TACTICS

It sprays when the spray is ready and bites when it is not, and it takes the heaviest creature on the crust first. It withdraws at 22 hit points or fewer, or when it feels no creature on the crust.

Who it's for

Levels 2 to 4. The budget line, run at the encounter calculator: target band levels 2-4; one blisterback is raw 450 and adjusted 450 at the single-monster multiplier.

One blisterback against four 2nd-level characters is 450 adjusted against thresholds of 200, 400, 600 and 800, a **Medium** encounter. Against four 3rd-level characters the same 450 is **Easy** on paper, against 300, 600, 900 and 1,600, and a pair is better: two blisterbacks lying in one hollow are 900 raw at the two-monster multiplier of 1.5, so 1,350 adjusted, which is **Hard**. Against four 4th-level characters the same pair is 1,350 against 500, 1,000, 1,500 and 2,000, which is **Medium**. Both are on the crust from the first round, and nothing arrives later.

It needs no new subsystem. The spray is a Dexterity save and the sense is one the book already has. It runs on any salt flat in a Dark Sun campaign and on any dry lake, salt pan or bleached tideflat in another.

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What the party reaches for

The standard kit against a hunter that feels the ground, and the ruling on each.

Walking round. Three days along the rock, no roll. The pan is the short road and it is not the only road.

A rope. Tied between characters on the crust it changes nothing the blisterback feels. Tied to a stake driven into rock at the edge, it lets two characters on the line haul a third 30 feet toward the rock in one action, no roll.

A torch or a lantern. The blisterback is blind. Light does nothing for it or against it.

Ranged attacks. A character on bare ground more than 5 feet from the blisterback is not felt and is not seen. The cone reaches 10 feet. An archer on the rock at 30 feet shoots it freely until the start of its turn, when it feels no creature on the crust and withdraws.

A mount or a pack beast. A beast on the crust is felt like anyone else, and it is the heaviest thing there. A rider who dismounts onto rock is not felt.

Boards, hides, a folded cloak. A character standing on one is off the crust and is not felt. Moving the board costs the character's whole move for 5 feet.

Create water. Ten gallons wets a 10-foot square of crust to brine. A creature standing on brine is off the crust.

Misty step. Takes a character to any bare ground within 30 feet. Onto crust it changes nothing.

Fly* and *levitate. A creature that touches nothing is not felt. The spell lasts ten minutes, and the pan is forty miles.

Pass without trace* and *silence. Nothing. The blisterback feels the step and does not hear it.

Stealth. A hidden character on the crust is felt and is not hidden from it.

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The Salt-Reader

Kelva Orrin has cut salt on the pan for twenty-two years. She reads the etched lines the way a farmer reads weather: how many, how fresh, which way they run, and whether two were cut by one animal or by a pair. She prices a crossing by what she finds. She will lead a party over the white for a day's wage and will not step off the rock on a night with a new line in the crust.

Her line, to anyone who offers the cheaper guide: *"Every line is a walk it has already made. Count them."*

The Lair and the Trade

The hollow. A foot-deep scrape in the crust, bare mud at the bottom and rimed white at the lip. There is no treasure in it. Bones lie in it, picked clean.

The acid. The gland, drawn cold within an hour of the kill, fills one clay jar and keeps a season. Any city with a tannery, a locksmith or a jeweler pays 25 gp for the jar. It strips hide, opens a hinge nobody has the key to, and eats the glaze off a ceramic coin so cleanly that the coin looks freshly struck, which nobody advertises.

Hooks. The cheapest guide in the caravan yard cannot read the lines, and he will say so at noon, when the crust starts to crack behind the party. A tanner will buy every jar the party brings and asks what became of the last buyer. A caravan master has moved the stake line east and will not say who paid for it.

What the crust says

Things seen on the white. Roll once per crossing, or pick one.

D12	What the crust says
1	**A line,** thin as a thread, cut into the crust and running straight for a mile to a cairn of salt blocks.
2	**A ring of circles,** each a stride across and overlapping like the links of a chain.
3	**A boot,** upright, the sole eaten away to the welt.
4	**Three parallel lines** running in from the east, the middle one the deepest.
5	**A water jar,** empty, the glaze gone and the clay beneath it clean.
6	**A scrape** a foot deep with bare mud at the bottom, still damp.
7	**A ceramic bit** lying face up, the glaze eaten off and the face beneath it bright as new.
8	**A trail of drops,** each a thumb wide with a ring of dead white round it, leading toward the rock.
9	**The bones of a pack beast,** picked clean, the crust round them etched to lace.
10	**A line** that crosses the stake line twice and goes on.
11	**An obsidian pick,** upright in the crust, the haft bleached white.
12	**Forty yards of crust** with no mark on it, and one set of old footprints standing on top.

Long Island Dungeon Master. 30+ years of real tables.

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